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THE MONASTERIES OF THE WADI NATRUN, EGYPT: A MONASTIC AND PERSONAL JOURNEY*

Tim Vivian

In January and February of 1996 I had the great good fortune of joining the team of American archeologists, faculty, and students who went to Wadi Natrun, Egypt;¹ we were there to excavate the Monastery of Saint John the Little and study firsthand Coptic monasticism and Church history.² Since I am a patristics scholar and third-order member of the Order of the Holy Cross (Anglican), and have been writing about early monasticism since my graduation from seminary in 1988, this trip was for me a personal monastic journey: an exciting chance to experience in the desert what I had learned from books, and an opportunity to participate in the history and spirituality of Egyptian monasticism. In this article I wish to combine historical research, on-site reporting, and personal reflection to suggest the historical importance and spiritual relevance of Coptic monasticism for those of us in the West.

Tim Vivian is an Episcopal priest and independent scholar specializing in patristics and early monasticism; his most recent book is *Journeying into God: Seven Early Monastic Lives* (Fortress, 1996). His address is 10120 Sunset Canyon Drive, Bakersfield, CA, 93311-2245 and his e-mail address is <StOrigen@aol.com>.

*To Joyce: dear friend, traveling companion, archeological assistant, nurse, and camel rider. And to the students of Wadi Natrun '96, Reagan, Maged, Mike, Kate, Jeremy, Jennifer, Julia, Cheri, Liz: they endured. My thanks to Bruce Jones, Maged Mikhail, and Jeffrey Russell for reading and commenting on versions of the manuscript for this article and to Fr. Charles Cummings, O.C.S.O. for his suggestions.

¹The archeological dig was sponsored by the Scriptorium Institute for Christian Antiquities in Grand Haven, Michigan; the academic portion was part of the Scriptorium's Semester in Egypt Program. Regrettably, the academic program has been eliminated and the dig was cancelled for 1997.

²John Kolobos, or John the Little, is also known as John the Short and John the Dwarf. For a discussion of his life and the founding of the

I. BACKGROUND: A BRIEF HISTORY OF MONASTICISM IN THE WADI NATRUN

Widespread monasticism in lower (northern) Egypt in the fourth century may have had its origins, oddly enough, in two unconsummated marriages. Around 313, shortly after Constantine had brought an end to state persecution of Christians and ushered in "the peace of the Church," a young Christian named Amoun, living in the Nile delta, was forced by his uncle to marry; on his wedding night, however, he persuaded his wife that they ought to live together not as husband and wife, but as brother and sister, devoting themselves to the Lord. She agreed, and they lived this way for eighteen years before he was called to the solitary life of a monk. Around 330, he left his home and "went to the inner mountain of Nitria," forty miles south of Alexandria and west of the delta, and "built himself two rounded cells and lived another twenty-two years in the desert." 3 Attracted to his way of life, disciples soon joined Amoun, and monasticism began to flourish in Nitria. Within ten years, Nitria had become too crowded for Amoun, so he and Saint Antony together founded Kellia, the

monastery bearing his name, see H.G. Evelyn White, The Monasteries of the Wâdi 'n Natrûn, pt. 2, The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis (New York, 1926-33; rpt., New York: Arno 1973) 106-11. For sayings attributed to him, see The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, rev. ed., 1984) 85-96, 109. There is a Coptic Life by the seventh-century bishop, Zacharias of Sakhâ; See Zacharias of Sakhâ, "An Encomium on the Life of John the Little," trans. Maged S. Mikhail and Tim Vivian, Coptic Church Review 18:1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 1997) 3-64. For the most recent study, with full bibliography, see Lucien Regnault, "John Colobos, Saint," The Coptic Encyclopedia, ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan 1991) 5.1359-61. Because the archeological team plans to publish annual reports of the excavation, in this article I will not go into details about the dig: an abbreviated report of the 1996 dig by Bastiaan Van Elderen will appear in Coptic Church Review.

³Palladius, Lausiac History (LH) 8, trans. Robert T. Meyer (New York: Newman 1964) 41-43. The version in Historia Monachorum 22 differs: Amoun left "a few days" after his wedding night, and his wife "exhorted all her servants to adopt the celibate life, and indeed converted her house into a monastery." See The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto, trans. Norman Russell (Kalamazoo: Cistercian 1980) 111. The Church historian Socrates, in his Ecclesiastical History 4.23, has yet a different version: both Amoun and his wife moved to Nitria, where they lived together for a short time in a hut with an oratory. See also Derwas J. Chitty, The Desert a City (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, n.d.) 11, and Eve-

Cells, about 10-12 miles soution remembered Amoun of Antony "saw his soul borne u

A shotgun "wedding" app Great to the desert of Scetis Nitria, about the same time monasticism to the north. I from the Apophthegmata (Se ius offers an autobiographic Already a monk, he fled to a ordination. A young girl in when she was asked "who chorite"-Macarius-as the "they came to seize me, led with soot and various othe through the village in all di monk has defiled our virgin me almost to death." The "keep" her, which he does: "C the baskets I had, saying, 'S to eat." When it comes time unable until finally she co Macarius is not the father. pent, and they want to com as Macarius concludes the ple would disturb me, I got

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lyn White, 45-50; Evelyn White 315. For sayings attributed to

4See Chitty, 29, Kellia has b site in Egypt. For a recent pres lications, see *Les Kellia: Ermit* d'art et histoire 1989).

⁵Historia Monachorum 22;

⁶Macarius the Great 1, War

STORY OF MONASTICISM IN THE

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I.G. Evelyn White, The Monasteries of the

Cells, about 10-12 miles south of Nitria.⁴ Later monastic tradition remembered Amoun of Nitria with such reverence that Antony "saw his soul borne up to heaven by angels." ⁵

A shotgun "wedding" apparently brought Saint Macarius the Great to the desert of Scetis (Wadi Natrun), forty miles south of Nitria, about the same time as Amoun was establishing desert monasticism to the north. In one of the most delightful stories from the Apophthegmata (Sayings of the Desert Fathers), Macarius offers an autobiographical sketch of his early monastic life: Already a monk, he fled to an unnamed village in order to avoid ordination. A young girl in the village became pregnant and, when she was asked "who was to blame," identified "the anchorite"-Macarius-as the father. Then, Macarius narrates, "they came to seize me, led me to the village and hung pots black with soot and various other things round my neck and led me through the village in all directions, beating me and saying, 'This monk has defiled our virgin, catch him, catch him,' and they beat me almost to death." The girl's parents insist that Macarius "keep" her, which he does: "Going to my cell, I gave [my friend] all the baskets I had, saying, 'Sell them, and give my wife something to eat." When it comes time for Macarius' "wife" to deliver, she is unable until finally she confesses that she has lied and that Macarius is not the father. When the villagers hear this they repent, and they want to come to Macarius "and do penance." But, as Macarius concludes the story, "when I heard this, for fear people would disturb me, I got up and fled here to Scetis." 6

Both these stories are inherently plausible: the example of Amoun and his wife, vowing themselves to virginity, would not have been unfamiliar in the early fourth century. Macarius flees ordination, a widely known act of monastic protest; the story of Macarius' "wife" seems to acknowledge that such accusations

lyn White, 45-50; Evelyn White believes, 47, that Amoun came to Nitria in 315. For sayings attributed to Amoun, see Ward, *Sayings*, 31-32.

4See Chitty, 29, Kellia has been so far the best excavated early monastic site in Egypt. For a recent presentation, with a bibliography of earlier publications, see *Les Kellia: Ermitages coptes en Basse-Égypte* (Geneva: Musée d'art et histoire 1989).

⁵Historia Monachorum 22; Russell, Lives, 112. See also Life of Antony 60.

⁶Macarius the Great 1, Ward, Sayings; 124-25. See Evelyn White, 62-63.

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were not unknown in the villages of Egypt. Both stories, in fact, are very human and very monastic: they show persons caught up in the world (through two forced marriages) who wish to flee worldly ways for the silence and solitude of the desert.

The monastic historian Palladius says that when Amoun went to Nitria, "there were no monasteries there as yet," which may be true, though both the phrase and the idea are similar to sentiments expressed about Saint Antony in the Life of Antony. One of the purposes of the Life of Antony, in fact, is to make Antony the "father" of Egyptian monasticism; nevertheless, the Life acknowledges that there were monks and "monasteries" (not monasteries in the later and modern sense, but rather cells, or small groups of monastics living together) before Antony (see Life 3-4). With regard to Nitria, the same may have been true of Amoun and Macarius: isolated solitaries may have already been living in the desert west of the Nile delta, but Amoun and Macarius were remembered as the founders of sustained, widespread monasticism in these areas.

By 330 Egypt was becoming recognizably monastic. Antony had been a monk for some forty-five years and around 313 had moved to his interior mountain by the Red Sea; around 323-24 Pachomius founded the first community of his *koinonia* at Tabennisi in Upper (southern) Egypt. In 328 Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria, and by 330 was visiting the monks in the Thebaid; thus by 330 the alliance between the episcopate of Alexandria and the monks of Egypt was already being formed. It is an alliance that continues to this day: the present leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, is a monk and takes his name from one of the most famous monks of Egypt, Saint Shenoute the Great (348-466). The pope spends part of each week in Cairo and Alexandria and part at the patriarchal compound at the monastery of Saint Bishoi, one of four active monasteries in the Wadi Natrun

The Wadi Natrun, then, h tic life for over 1600 years. the Coptic shi hêt, "to weigh for a place long dedicated to The Wadi itself has a well miles long that runs in a n end is about 40 miles north one of the largest cities in ago, Derwas Chitty describe tian desert. Scetis is its cita (three of its surviving mons even a motor-road from Alex along the low scarp to the Wadi is not as remote now there by car from Cairo in o way signs in Arabic and Er ies. Modern irrigation has road; thus the freeway has fields, speeding cars and tr signs of the modern, all con

And yet the Wadi Natru today as it was in antiquity thor of the *Historia Monach* spiritual tourists traveled to Scetis because the desertourists skip the Wadi Natruhey are more interested in

10"Shiêt, the place where t ment." Zacharie, "Vie de Jea Musée Guimet 25 (Paris 1894)

11Otto F.A. Meinardus, Moi (Cairo: American U in Cairo P,

 12 Chitty, 13.

13On the dangers of deser Ward, 89: "One day when Abba brothers, their guide lost his w to Abba John, 'What shall we do for the brother has lost the wa

¹⁴Most Westerners know li its ancient history and tradition

⁷Chitty, 11-13, and Evelyn White, 45-50, 62-63, accept both stories.

⁸Life of Antony 3. See Lausiac History 8; Meyer, 43.

⁹An icon of Saint Athanasius in a chapel dedicated to him at the monastery of Saint Antony on the Red Sea depicts the great bishop with monastic headdress; see Nabil Selim Atalla, *Coptic Art*, volume 1, *Wallpaintings* (Cairo: Lehnert & Landrock, n.d.) 89.

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The Wadi Natrun, then, has been the site of continuous monastic life for over 1600 years. Its ancient name, Scetis, comes from the Coptic shi hêt, "to weigh the heart," a most appropriate name for a place long dedicated to silence, prayer, and contemplation. 10 The Wadi itself has a well-watered strip of oases about 20-25 miles long that runs in a northwesterly direction. Its southeast end is about 40 miles northwest of Cairo¹¹; thus it is neighbor to one of the largest cities in the world. Writing some thirty years ago, Derwas Chitty described Nitria as "the gateway of the Egyptian desert. Scetis is its citadel, with a stark abased remoteness (three of its surviving monasteries are set below sea level) that even a motor-road from Alexandria to Cairo passing within sight along the low scarp to the north cannot really destroy." 12 The Wadi is not as remote now as when Chitty wrote: you can travel there by car from Cairo in one and a half to two hours, and freeway signs in Arabic and English point the way to the monasteries. Modern irrigation has made the desert green alongside the road; thus the freeway has become a kind of asphalt Nile. Green fields, speeding cars and trucks, and billboards, those ubiquitous signs of the modern, all conspire to take away remoteness.

And yet the Wadi Natrun is nearly as far off the beaten path today as it was in antiquity, though for different reasons. The author of the *Historia Monachorum* reports that in 394 his group of spiritual tourists traveled down the Nile to Nitria but did not go to Scetis because the desert route was too dangerous. Modern tourists skip the Wadi Natrun not because of danger but because they are more interested in King Tut than Coptic monasteries. 14

10"Shiêt, the place where they weigh hearts and thoughts with judgement." Zacharie, "Vie de Jean Colobos," ed. E. Amélineau, Annales du Musée Guimet 25 (Paris 1894) 316-410, 326. See Mikhail and Vivian, 28.

11Otto F.A. Meinardus, Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Desert (Cairo: American U in Cairo P, rev. ed., 1992) 50.

12Chitty 13

13On the dangers of desert travel, see for example John Colobos 17; Ward, 89: "One day when Abba John was going up to Scetis with some other brothers, their guide lost his way for it was night-time. So the brothers said to Abba John, 'What shall we do, abba, in order not to die wandering about, for the brother has lost the way?"

14Most Westerners know little or nothing about the Coptic Church and its ancient history and traditions, much less anything about Muslim Egypt;

As in the fourth century, however, there are still pilgrims: on Fridays through Sundays, especially before Lent, busloads of Copts—men, women, and numerous children—come to visit the monasteries, considered some of the holiest sites of the Coptic Church. These latter-day pilgrims, thousands of them, connect the present to the past and the past to the present; their presence and devotion provide convincing and powerful testimony to the continuing vital heritage of monasticism in Egypt. 15

At the Syrian Monastery, just a short walk west of the monastery of Saint Bishoi, stands Saint Ephraem's tree. According to Coptic tradition, when Saint Ephraem (308-73) came to the Wadi Natrun from Syria, he planted his staff in the ground; because of God's grace, it budded and grew into a tamarind tree, which, 1600 years later, still graces the courtyard of the monastery. That tree both symbolizes and actualizes the deep roots of monasticism in the Coptic Church: growing out of the desert sand, its green branches represent God's nurturing care over the centuries through straitened circumstances. At the Syrian monastery a room once housing a printing press has been built around Saint Ephraem's tree and now houses the monastery's museum, and the monks meet under the tree every afternoon to say Vespers. 17

To the monks, Ephraem's tree, with its roots literally in the fourth century, is a living reminder—along with their liturgy,

Egypt remains the land of the pharaohs. For example, an ad in a recent edition of (March/April 1996) 27, offers this tour: "Travel from Cairo to Aswan and Luxor visiting many world famous sites including: the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx at Giza, the Temples of Luxor and Karnak, the painted tombs in the Valley of the Kings, the Valley of the Queens, and the golden treasures of Tutankhamen."

¹⁵The most recent history of the Coptic Church is that of Theodore Hall Partrick, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Greensboro, NC: Fisher 1996).

16For the story of the stick planted in desert sand that grows into a tree for John the Little, see John Colobos 1 (Ward, 85-86), and Evelyn White's discussion, 108. Evelyn White suggests, 108 n. 9, that this latter story in fact was "the model" for the story of Saint Ephraem's tree. John's tree, "the tree of obedience," could still be seen in 1921 growing on top of the wall of the abandoned monastery of John the Little; for a photograph, see Evelyn White, *History*, plate VA, following p. 497.

¹⁷See Meinardus, 106.

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¹⁸The definitive early hist also Chitty, 11-13, 29-35. For origins to the present, see Metian Deserts.

¹⁹Rufinus, Ecclesiastical I. while Palladius (Lausiac His speaks of 5,000 at Nitria and

²⁰See Douglas Burton-Ch the Quest for Holiness in Earl Oxford UP 1993) 77.

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monastic offices, and ancient buildings-of the history of monasticism in the Wadi Natrun. To the monks, that history probably appears more linear and continuous than it does to the Western historian or archeologist or other non-monastics looking in. From such an outside angle the history of monasticism in the Wadi Natrun seems above all precarious-and tenacious-like a tree in desert soil.18 Monasticism's survival here, as one monk has said about the revival of the monastery of Saint Macarius, is impossible according to the will of man, possible only by the grace of God.

As auspicious as were the beginnings of monastic life in Nitria, Kellia, and Scetis, the first full flowering of monasticism lasted only a hundred years before two disasters shook the three settlements. By the end of the fourth century, a mere fifty years after Amoun and Macarius had gone out into the desert, Nitria may have had as many as three to five thousand monks.¹⁹ More important than numbers, the monks bequeathed a spiritual tradition that was to profoundly affect all of Christendom. The roots of this tradition can best be seen in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers, which probably had their origins in Scetis.20 In the original Greek, and translated into Latin, Coptic, and Syriac, then Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Old Slavonic, the Sayings deeply influenced both Eastern and Western spirituality.

But the very vitality of the tradition created internal tensions that by the end of the fourth century were fracturing monasticism, making it a house divided against itself. Then external forces attacked. The internal destruction came because of the theological conflicts over anthropomorphism and Origenism at the very end of the fourth century, while the external devastation came shortly after at the hands of barbarian raiders at the beginning of the fifth century. Apparently there had long been tensions between the more educated Greek-speaking monks and their sim-

 $^{^{18}{\}rm The}$ definitive early history is still that of Evelyn White, ${\it History}.$ See also Chitty, 11-13, 29-35. For the history of each existing monastery from its origins to the present, see Meinardus, Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts.

¹⁹Rufinus, Ecclesiastical History 2.3, reports 3,000 around the year 373, while Palladius (Lausiac History 7; Meyer, 40), about twenty years later, speaks of 5,000 at Nitria and 600 at Kellia.

 $^{^{20}\}mathrm{See}$ Douglas Burton-Christie, The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP 1993) 77.

pler Coptic brethren. The Greeks (with Evagrius of Pontus as their spiritual leader) tended to follow the thinking of the great exegete and theologian Origen of Alexandria (d. 254) and read much of the Bible figuratively and allegorically. The Copts tended to be more literal-minded. Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria, in his Easter Letter of 399, condemned the more literal interpretation, called anthropomorphism, that understood God as having human speech, emotions, and parts. Many of the monks of Nitria and Kellia applauded this decision, but according to John Cassian it "was received very bitterly by almost every sort of monk throughout all Egypt." 21 At Scetis only one of the four congregations would allow the letter to be read. One old monk, on hearing the condemnation of anthropomorphism, reportedly cried out, "Ah the misfortune! They've taken my God away from me. I have no one to hold on to, and I don't know whom to adore or to address." 22 The Church historian Socrates reports that as a result of Theophilus' Easter Letter, the monks "left their monasteries and came to Alexandria where they raised a tumult against the bishop, accusing him of impiety and threatening to put him to death." 23 As a result, Theophilus did an abrupt about-face and condemned Origenism. Some 300 monks, including the four learned and famous Tall Brothers, then fled Nitria for Palestine and Constantinople where they embroiled the beleaguered bishop, John Chrysostom, in further conflicts.²⁴ How many returned is unknown.²⁵

Nitria, Kellia, and Scetis, though damaged, would have survived such turmoil (especially Scetis, which was less affected by

²¹Cassian, Conferences 10.2; John Cassian, Conferences, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist 1985) 125. Cassian, a follower of Evagrius of Pontus, an Origenist, was disdainful of "the absurd heresy of the Anthropomorphites."

²²Cassian, Conferences 10.2; Luibheid, 127.

²³Socrates, Ecclesiastical History 6.7.

²⁴The brothers were Ammonius, Dioscorus, Eusebius, and Euthymius. On these brothers, see Evelyn White, 136-44, and the "Index of Persons," 482; for a recent summary of the events in Egypt (disparaging Theophilus, "the Egyptian Pharoah") and an account of the brothers' flight to Constantinople and the embroilment over them between Chrysostom and Epiphanius, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell 1995) 191-210.

²⁵See Chitty, 58, and for a detailed study, Evelyn White, *History*, 125-44;

the Origenist exodus),26 bu Mazices, Berber invaders f Scetis.²⁷ Three years later, invaders struck again; in or in Church history, one monl lost Rome; the monks Scetis time the monks returned a and, beginning in the fifth tions, but Scetis lost many Black and seven companio Bishoi, founders of two mon died soon in exile.29 Destruc the monasteries down thr Muslim conquest of Egypt is usually, though not always the fortunes of the four surv have ebbed and flowed unti

II. FOREGROUND: MONASTE

Today there are four flor trun: Deir Anbâ Bishoi (th Barâmûs (Baramus; fro

the latter, however, on 127, to genist material in the Pachomi versy over Origen and Origen Controversy: The Cultural Co (Princeton: Princeton UP 1992)

²⁶Evelyn White, 133-34, est rives his figures, that Anthro genists at Scetis by three to on Kellia.

²⁷See Evelyn White, *History*

²⁸See Moses 10; Ward, 140. ²⁹Evelyn White, *History*, 15

30For the monastery of Sair el-Meskeen, Coptic Monastici Short History (Cairo: St. Maca

31On the later histories of turies, see Evelyn White, *Histo*

32I will not discuss the I monastery here. See Evelyn V

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ks (with Evagrius of Pontus as follow the thinking of the great of Alexandria (d. 254) and read d allegorically. The Copts tended philus, bishop of Alexandria, in ned the more literal interpretathat understood God as having rts. Many of the monks of Nitria ion, but according to John Casly by almost every sort of monk is only one of the four congregaread. One old monk, on hearing norphism, reportedly cried out, n my God away from me. I have know whom to adore or to adsocrates reports that as a result e monks "left their monasteries ney raised a tumult against the and threatening to put him to s did an abrupt about-face and 00 monks, including the four s, then fled Nitria for Palestine y embroiled the beleaguered ther conflicts.24 How many re-

ugh damaged, would have suretis, which was less affected by

Cassian, Conferences, trans. Colm 5. Cassian, a follower of Evagrius of "the absurd heresy of the Anthropo-

id, 127.

oscorus, Eusebius, and Euthymius. 136-44, and the "Index of Persons," in Egypt (disparaging Theophilus, unt of the brothers' flight to Coner them between Chrysostom and outh: The Story of John Chrysostom

cudy, Evelyn White, *History*, 125-44;

the Origenist exodus),26 but just a few years later, in 407, the Mazices, Berber invaders from the western desert, devastated Scetis.27 Three years later, in 410, the year of the sack of Rome, invaders struck again; in one of the more poignant exclamations in Church history, one monk reportedly cried out, "The world has lost Rome; the monks Scetis." A third sack occurred in 434. Each time the monks returned and rebuilt, at least to some extent, and, beginning in the fifth century, they started to add fortifications, but Scetis lost many of its most eminent monks: Moses the Black and seven companions were slain;28 John the Little and Bishoi, founders of two monasteries in the Wadi Natrun, fled and died soon in exile.29 Destruction and rebuilding become a motif of the monasteries down through their later history.30 After the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641, persecution de jure and de facto usually, though not always, replaced outright destruction, and the fortunes of the four surviving monasteries of the Wadi Natrun have ebbed and flowed until their current revitalization.³¹

II. FOREGROUND: MONASTERIES ANCIENT AND MODERN 32

Today there are four flourishing monasteries in the Wadi Natrun: Deir Anbâ Bishoi (the Monastery of Saint Bishoi), Deir al-Barâmûs (Baramus; from the Coptic *Pa Romeos*, "the

the latter, however, on 127, too readily accepts as primary later anti-Origenist material in the Pachomian corpus. For this early stage of the controversy over Origen and Origenism, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton UP 1992) 43-84.

²⁶Evelyn White, 133-34, estimates, though without saying where he derives his figures, that Anthropomorphists "appeared" to outnumber Origenists at Scetis by three to one, with the "disproportion" less at Nitria and Kellia.

²⁷See Evelyn White, *History*, 151-61.

²⁸See Moses 10; Ward, 140.

²⁹Evelyn White, *History*, 157-59.

³⁰For the monastery of Saint Macarius as an example, see Father Matta el-Meskeen, Coptic Monasticism and the Monastery of St. Macarius: A Short History (Cairo: St. Macarius 1984) 36-39.

³¹On the later histories of the monasteries in the fifth to seventh centuries, see Evelyn White, *History*, and Meinardus, *Monks and Monasteries*.

32I will not discuss the historical and traditional origins of each monastery here. See Evelyn White, *History*, 95-115, and Meinardus in the

[Monastery] of the Romans"), Deir el-Sourian (the Monastery of the Holy Virgin and Saint John Kame; the Syrian Monastery), and Deir Abû Maqâr (the Monastery of Saint Macarius).³³ Of these four monasteries, three—Bishoi, Baramus, and Macarius—go back to the fourth century, but not in their present form and location. Each preserves traditions connecting it to the beginnings of monasticism in the Wadi Natrun.³⁴

Saint Macarius may have first settled at the western end of the Wadi, near Baramus, and later moved near the monastery that now bears his name.³⁵ When John Cassian visited Scetis at the end of the fourth century, there were four *ecclesiae* or "congregations":³⁶ Saint Macarius, the Monastery of the Romans, Saint Bishoi, and the Monastery of Saint John the Little, which was abandoned in the fifteenth century.³⁷ In the middle of the fourth century, Athanasius proclaimed, a bit hyperbolically and prolepti-

chapter on each monastery. For descriptions of the modern monasteries, see Meinardus, and O.H.E. KHS-Burmester, A Guide to the Monasteries of the Wadi 'N-Natrun (Cairo: Société d'archéologie Copte 1954). Burmester's little book, like the first edition of Meinardus' Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts (1961), was written before the present renaissance of monasticism in the Wadi Natrun and thus provides an excellent opportunity for the interested reader to make comparisons. Burmester's volume also has thiry-two black and white photographs that provide numerous striking contrasts with the present-day monasteries. An excellent book on modern Egyptian monasticism, with wonderful color photographs, is Alain and Evelyne Chevillat, Moines du Désert d'Égypte (Lyon: Terre du Ciel 1990).

³³In this article I have not treated the topic of nuns in the Coptic Church, not because it is not an important subject, but because I did not have the opportunity to visit any monasteries of women or talk with any nuns. On the subject of ancient women ascetics in Egypt, see Susanna Elm, "Virgins of God": The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity (Oxford: Clarendon 1994) esp. 227-372; on modern female monastics, see Pieternella Van Doorn-Harder, Contemporary Coptic Nuns (Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P 1995).

³⁴The Syrian monastery probably dates to the eighth century; see Evelyn White, 309-21.

³⁵See Evelyn White, 102, 104-06.

³⁶Conferences 10.2.

³⁷See Chitty, 35, and Evelyn White, 95-124, supplemented by Meinardus. El-Maqrizi (d. 1441-42) reports that in his day there were only three monks left at the Monastery of John the Little; see Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, ed. and trans., *Macrizi's Geschichte der Copten* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms 1979) 111.

cally, that the desert was be that metaphor, it seems, w dented number of people wh is not an image a monk v were leaving their towns ar version of the Life of Anton though, still characterizes sense, the monasteries of majority of the monks highl arts and trades of the mode teries are cities hidden be passer would not know the nificant: originally erected bolize a determined resist The city is not far away. To come through Cairo. After and crush of this megalo monasteries of the Wadi N way, they preserve the and

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38Life of Antony 14.

³⁹Some cities, like Oxyrh monastic. That is, at least, wh sell, 67.

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e, 95-124, supplemented by Meinarnat in his day there were only three he Little; see Ferdinand Wüstenfeld, er Copten (Hildesheim: Georg Olms cally, that the desert was becoming a city.38 What he intended by that metaphor, it seems, was to picture the large and unprecedented number of people who were populating the desert.³⁹ But it is not an image a monk would have readily used—the monks were leaving their towns and cities! And, significantly, the Coptic version of the Life of Antony drops the metaphor.40 This tension, though, still characterizes modern Coptic monasticism. In one sense, the monasteries of the Wadi Natrun are cities, with the majority of the monks highly educated and trained in many of the arts and trades of the modern city.41 At the same time, the monasteries are cities hidden behind high walls, and the casual bypasser would not know there are cities within. The walls are significant: originally erected to keep out invaders, they now symbolize a determined resistance to invasions against the spirit. The city is not far away. To get to the Wadi Natrun, you have to come through Cairo. After you experience the noise, pollution, and crush of this megalopolis, you immediately see that the monasteries of the Wadi Natrun are not cities at all! Seen in this way, they preserve the ancient monastic protest against the city.

But a modern Athanasius would be firmly justified in his enthusiasm for the revival of monasticism in Egypt. Thirty or forty years ago, Coptic monasticism was in serious decline, with falling numbers, an aging population, and decrepit buildings. In 1960, nine major monasteries numbered 200 monks; in 1986, that number had risen to 600, a three-fold increase. In addition, in Upper Egypt two new monasteries have been officially recognized by the Church, and "formerly abandoned monasteries . . . have been

³⁸Life of Antony 14.

³⁹Some cities, like Oxyrhynchus, may in fact have become virtually monastic. That is, at least, what the *Historia Monachorum* 5 reports; Russell, 67.

⁴⁰See Tim Vivian, trans., "Life of Antony by St. Athanasius of Alexandria," Coptic Church Review 15.1 & 2 (Spring and Summer 1994) 17.

41Since the accession of Pope Shenouda no one is accepted as a novice unless he has a college degree. When I got sick with dysentery during my stay in the Wadi Natrun, I was taken good care of by Fr. Nofer, who had been trained as a pharmacist and whom I had met in our compound as he supervised the work in the orchard, and Fr. Isidorus, a medical doctor, with whom I had long sickbed discussions about Anglicanism and ecumenism.

⁴²The numbers have apparently continued to increase, though I do not have current figures.

repeopled with monks." ⁴³ In the last twenty-five years, all the monasteries of the Wadi Natrun have undertaken large-scale building projects (often made difficult by the government), including large, new dormitories for the increased number of monks.

More importantly, largely through the leadership of Pope Shenouda, the monasteries have built new retreat centers and implemented evangelical programs.⁴⁴ With the increased numbers of monks, a renewed spirit, and—not unimportant—improved roadways linking the monasteries with cities and towns, the monasteries have gone from a position of hanging on and merely surviving to one of active participation in the Coptic Church as a whole: "the desert monasteries are woven into the fabric of the parish churches of the cities, towns, and villages." ⁴⁵

What are the reasons for this renaissance? Many Westerners offer economic explanations for the increased number of monastic vocations, such as the worsening economy in Egypt and the rise of Muslim fundamentalism; however, since all new vocations must have college degrees, these are individuals with the means to capital, and the things it can buy, yet they exchange these worldly goods for celibacy, poverty, and labor. One very important factor in the revival of monasticism is the intimate relationship in Egypt between monasticism and the parish: monastic saints and ideals are spoken of in all aspects of the Church's teaching; whatever the topic, a monastic reference will inevitably enter. The monastic fathers are mentioned, prominently, in every liturgy; the long office is dominated by monks. In the Coptic Church, encountering a monk is normal; he is as near as the next sermon, the next liturgy, or the next book that a friend recommends. The revival of Coptic monasticism is part of an overall revival of the Coptic Church; however, the revival must be seen as the germination of a seed ever latent tic Church, like the Celtic Ir and monastic.

If you stand on the roof Bishoi, where our group sta can see in a series of snapsl of this monastic renaissan Egyptian [the desert] contin doorway, at the end of his midst of desolation is the 1 the west, toward the sunset ground, the small "city" of S the northwest is the mona towers, domes, and palm tr main monastery lie the ag plete with automotive gar watch the tractors returning patriarchal compound whe new building of cells as in south of our retreat center grapefruit, and grapes. In retreat cells for the monk yond in the desert. In the ceptible, is the marker for John the Little. When you monastery to the ancient hermits' cells out in the d little wall, and some have scription of a visit with a l

⁴⁶I wish to thank Maged Monday of which I have silently quoted

⁴⁷Lucien Regnault, *La vie e IVe siècle* (Paris: Hachette 199

⁴⁸For the theme that the Helen Waddell, *Beasts and S* 1995 [1934]) and Vivian, *Jour* 166-87.

⁴⁹For a stark contrast with tory, plate VB, following p. 4 monastery reproduced there, lutely nothing but sand outsi

⁴³Meinardus, x.

⁴⁴On the revitalization of eremitic monasticism in Egypt under Abd al-Masih al-Habashi (the Ethiopian) and Abouna Mina el-Baramousi, later to become Pope Kyrillos, the immediate predecessor of Pope Shenouda, see John Watson, "Abba Kyrillos: Patriarch and Solitary," *Coptic Church Review* 17:1 & 2 (Spring & Summer 1996) 7-48, esp.10-11, and the notes there for further references.

⁴⁵Meinardus, x. For the recent renaissance of the Coptic Church in general, see Partrick, chapter 11, whose "principal focus" is the "ongoing revival in the Coptic Church since 1959."

in have undertaken large-scale icult by the government), include increased number of monks. arough the leadership of Pope e built new retreat centers and ms.44 With the increased numit, and—not unimportant—imnasteries with cities and towns, n a position of hanging on and ive participation in the Coptic monasteries are woven into the he cities, towns, and villages." 45 renaissance? Many Westerners ne increased number of monastic economy in Egypt and the rise of er, since all new vocations must dividuals with the means to capet they exchange these worldly abor. One very important factor s the intimate relationship in the parish: monastic saints and of the Church's teaching; whatence will inevitably enter. The , prominently, in every liturgy; onks. In the Coptic Church, enis as near as the next sermon, that a friend recommends. The

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part of an overall revival of the val must be seen as the germi-

issance of the Coptic Church in gen-"principal focus" is the "ongoing renation of a seed ever latent within the Coptic Church. 46 The Coptic Church, like the Celtic Irish Church of Saint Patrick, is ascetic and monastic.

If you stand on the roof of the retreat center adjoining Saint Bishoi, where our group stayed, and look in each direction, you can see in a series of snapshots, as it were, the external features of this monastic renaissance. All around is desert: "On every Egyptian [the desert] continually imposes its presence. It is at his doorway, at the end of his field, his view, his life." 47 But in the midst of desolation is the monastic garden.⁴⁸ In the distance to the west, toward the sunset, is the Syrian monastery. In the foreground, the small "city" of Saint Bishoi spreads out before you. To the northwest is the monastery proper, with its imposing walls, towers, domes, and palm trees. South of-therefore, outside-the main monastery lie the agricultural and industrial areas, complete with automotive garage; toward dusk each day you can watch the tractors returning from the fields. Further south is the patriarchal compound where the pope lives. To its west is a large new building of cells as imposing as a hotel. To the north and south of our retreat center are orchards: olive, tangerine, apricot, grapefruit, and grapes. In the west and south you can see small retreat cells for the monks, some in an orchard, others just beyond in the desert. In the distance to the southeast, barely perceptible, is the marker for the abandoned monastery of Saint John the Little. When you take the road south past the modern monastery to the ancient monastery of Saint John, you see more hermits' cells out in the desert, just off the roadway; each has a little wall, and some have trees and a garden (see below for a description of a visit with a hermit).49

⁴⁶I wish to thank Maged Mikhail for his thoughts on this question, many of which I have silently quoted or paraphrased.

⁴⁷Lucien Regnault, La vie quotidienne des Pères du Désert en Égypte au IVe siècle (Paris: Hachette 1992) 15.

⁴⁸For the theme that the monks recreated the garden of paradise, see Helen Waddell, *Beasts and Saints* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1995 [1934]) and Vivian, *Journeying into God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress 1996) 166-87.

⁴⁹For a stark contrast with all this new building, see Evelyn White, *History*, plate VB, following p. 497. The photograph of Bishoi and the Syrian monastery reproduced there, taken, presumably, in the 1920s, shows absolutely nothing but sand outside the monastery walls.

As striking as all this is, though, the monastery of Saint Macarius most impressively captures the remarkable revival of the monasteries of the Wadi Natrun. I told the students that I could think of no monastic parallel of physical and spiritual renaissance since Cluny at its height and the Cistercian revival of the twelfth and thirteeenth centuries.⁵⁰ In 1969, Saint Macarius had five "old and sick" monks, as our guide, Fr. Philemmon, told us; today it has 120, and 700 agricultural and industrial workers on 12,500 square meters of land. Macarius reportedly supplies the five-star hotels of Alexandria and Cairo with their produce, and the monks have brought in pedigreed cattle from Germany; Baramus will soon have the largest olive press in Egypt. But these are recent developments. In the late 1960s "all the historical buildings" at Saint Macarius "were close to collapse and ruin," and had to be restored and rebuilt.⁵¹ Today at Macarius there are new churches, cells for the monks, guest quarters, an infirmary,52 refectory, library, printing offices, farm buildings, and dormitories for industrial and agricultural workers. Fr. Philemmon told us that now that he is too old for physical labor, his work is to translate, mostly from English into Arabic. He proudly showed us the library which, in addition to housing ancient manuscripts in Coptic and Arabic, has extensive holdings of Western books, including the Patrologia Graeca and Sources Chrétiennes; the monastery also subscribes to several foreign-language journals. In fact, the library symbolizes, and has contributed to, the spiritual and monastic revival in Egypt; almost all of the best spiritual

 $^{50}\mathrm{For}$ a recent report of a Westerner's visit to Saint Macarius and a deep appreciation of the monastery's spiritual gifts, see Alan Jones, Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality (San Francisco: Harper 1985) 12-16, and the entire book for Jones' fascinating integration of modern psychology and desert spirituality.

⁵¹Fr Matta, 73. As Burmester observed, 34, the number of monks and the church shrank together: "Since the number of the monks became greatly reduced, those who remained either did not wish to maintain the original dimensions of the church, since it was too large for them, or were unable to provide the necessary material for restoration, and in consequence, those parts which needed repair were allowed to fall into ruin."

⁵²As Fr. Matta reports, 76, "We hope that when the infirmary is completely fitted out with modern medical equipment and has an ambulance, it will be able to serve the victims of the many road accidents that occur on the nearby Cairo-Alexandria desert highway."

writing in Egypt today is books and pamphlets by the

What most impresses the how it harmonizes with th ings are not merely nostals they are clearly modern (the the monks' practical geniu buildings have monastic selves; rather, they blend t at its best. The ancient a forced and restored, exemp tradition made new. When courtyard down the steps t monastery, you step down entrance to the monastery corridor canopied by trees. brick, the same plentiful a at the entrance to the Syr of the monastery of Saint

This arch was discovered wall whose construction and the fourteenth century. Oth times to reinforce the dilap tighten up the ruined arch v bottom, and to support its f stone blocks—so as to keep sides and removing the m archway.

Archaeologists and archi not surrendering to our ta that we have been able to feat of construction made p

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What most impresses the visitor about all this new building is how it harmonizes with the ancient structures. The new buildings are not merely nostalgic and slavish imitations of the oldthey are clearly modern (the new bell tower at Macarius shows the monks' practical genius: it doubles as a water tank!). The buildings have monastic humility: they do not impose themselves; rather, they blend together the new and the old, tradition at its best. The ancient archway at Saint Macarius, now reinforced and restored, exemplifies the valuing and preservation of tradition made new. When you enter the monastery and cross the courtyard down the steps toward the three main churches of the monastery, you step down under an ancient arch, the northern entrance to the monastery before the ninth century, and into a corridor canopied by trees. The original arch is made of fired red brick, the same plentiful and inexpensive brick you can see today at the entrance to the Syrian monastery and in the ruined walls of the monastery of Saint John the Little. As Fr. Matta describes

This arch was discovered while removing layers of the enclosure wall whose construction and heightening around the church began in the fourteenth century. Other outer layers had been added in modern times to reinforce the dilapidated walls, and it took us six months to tighten up the ruined arch with a reinforced concrete layer from top to bottom, and to support its flanks with concrete pedestals, beams, and stone blocks—so as to keep it in balance after uncovering it on all sides and removing the masonry which had been built within the archway.

Archaeologists and architects are amazed that this arch stood fast, not surrendering to our tampering—despite its ruinous state, and that we have been able to anchor it as tightly as we have: this was a feat of construction made possible only through prayers for Divine assistance.⁵⁴

The arch at Saint Macarius literally represents the old embedded in the new, and it seems to me that the great genius of mod-

⁵³The Pope and Fr. Matta el-Meskeen, to name just two of the more important writers, have together written about a hundred books.

54Fr. Matta, 50-51.

ern Coptic monasticism is its synthetic theological and practical imagination. How many of us would patiently labor six months to keep an old brick arch alive while we built a new entryway over and around it! For the Copts, these bricks are not just bricks—they are spiritual reminders of their past, and the foundation of their present and future. At Macarius, a small museum displays a row of fine marble columns taken from the ancient church during restoration work. Fr. Matta illustrates the synthetic understanding of the monks by entitling the final chapter in his little book on the monastery "The Architectural and Spiritual Revival since 1969" 55: architecture and spirituality inform one another just as the bricks of the old archway help create the new. 56

The place of the monastic cell, that most basic architectural element of monasticism, in the modern monasteries of the Wadi Natrun perfectly illustrates this understanding. Each of the monasteries in the Wadi has large new dormitories for the monks' cells, but they have been built with a very clear eye on the past and a solid understanding of the contemplative life:

In the design of the cell we have kept in mind the principle of seclusion, which is a characteristic of Coptic monasticism. It is arranged in such a way that the monk may stay alone for many days with no need at all to leave the cell. It is provided with sufficient windows to admit fresh air, sunshine, and light, has a bathroom connected with a main sewage system, a separate kitchen, a small room—"a closet"—with a wooden floor on which a monk may sleep with no danger to his health, no matter how thin he may be, and a room for study and keeping vigil with a desk and wall cupboards. In order to ensure the necessary quietness, care was taken that each cell should be completely separate from the neighbouring cells, having a spacious veranda on one side and a staircase leading to the upper floors on the other. The roofs have been made thick, giving almost double the usual amount of sound insulation, and most of the furniture used is fixed to avoid noise. ⁵⁷

⁵⁵Ibid., 61-83.

⁵⁶Fr. Matta's final chapter includes not only a discussion of architecture, but also the printing press, farm buildings, generator and fuel station, housing for the agricultural workers, the monastery's land, and agricultural activity and livestock production. In other words, everything has its spiritual place in the design of the monastery, which is a microcosm of God's creation.

⁵⁷Fr. Matta, 62.

This description, with a a brochure for a five-star one thing: the monk's cell ancient monastic pattern addition of a kitchen does ian monastery, the new ce thetically pleasing two-st across a garden, several r century, that now make These ancient cells do r light" of the modern ones two rooms: an anteroom prayer and sleep. The m used until about thirty The anteroom has the m weaving baskets, tools, a simple mat on the floor a dles, and books. Much ha years, but the most basic monastic life, and it, like and prayer.

For the ancient monks cell within a cell,⁵⁸ contitioned earlier, monasticianchoritic or semi-anchored, often within proximarge cenobia or monaste may move to a hermitage one monk at Saint Bishe after eight years of livingroup were granted permonts:

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⁵⁸I owe this striking imaginterdisciplinary essay, "T Monasticism and Wildernes 53.

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not only a discussion of architecture, ildings, generator and fuel station, the monastery's land, and agricul. In other words, everything has its astery, which is a microcosm of God's

This description, with a few strategic changes, could belong in a brochure for a five-star hotel room in Alexandria-except for one thing: the monk's cell is designed for prayer; it follows a very ancient monastic pattern of allowing for two rooms in the cell (the addition of a kitchen does modify the ancient pattern). At the Syrian monastery, the new cells for the monks—in a spacious and esthetically pleasing two-storey building west of the church—face, across a garden, several restored cells, dating back to the seventh century, that now make up part of the monastery's museum. These ancient cells do not have the "fresh air, sunshine, and light" of the modern ones but, like the modern cells, they do have two rooms: an anteroom for work, and an inner chamber for prayer and sleep. The monastery has kept these ancient cellsused until about thirty years ago—as they were centuries ago. The anteroom has the monk's work implements: palm fronds for weaving baskets, tools, and a leather apron. The back room has a simple mat on the floor and niches in the walls to hold icons, candles, and books. Much has changed in Coptic monasticism in 1300 years, but the most basic element has not: the cell is the center of monastic life, and it, like the life, was and is designed for quiet and prayer.

For the ancient monks, the desert was a cell, so they lived in a cell within a cell,⁵⁸ contemplative quiet within quiet. As mentioned earlier, monasticism in the Wadi Natrun was originally anchoritic or semi-anchoritic, where each monk lived alone in a cell, often within proximity of other monks in their cells, not in large cenobia or monasteries as later and as today. Today, a monk may move to a hermitage after living a long time in the cenobium; one monk at Saint Bishoi was preparing to become an anchorite after eight years of living in community. Two members of our group were granted permission to visit a solitary. One of them reports:

From the first five minutes with the hermit it was obvious that I was in the presence of a monk. Not a bearded man wearing a black garment, but a *monk*. There was a gentle grace about him that is very difficult to explain. He was at peace. He was "other worldly" in the

⁵⁸I owe this striking image to Susan Power Bratton, in her fascinating interdisciplinary essay, "The Original Desert Solitaire: Early Christian Monasticism and Wilderness," *Environmental Ethics* 10.1 (Spring 1988) 31-53

best possible sense. He was a living Saying of the Fathers. As we continued to question him, we asked him about "the attacks or dangers a hermit encounters." We were thinking of snakes and scorpions; the hermit, however, talked not of snakes and scorpions but of the attacks of the Devil, both mental and physical, and of apparitions. Then he realized what he was saying, and quickly, even abruptly, changed the course of our conversation: the monks understand that these temptations are not to be shared with the general public. It's one thing for a monk of a monastery to tell how Saint Antony was tempted, but it is quite another for the one who has been tempted in the same way as Antony to share his story with anyone other than his father confessor.

For the length of those few short sentences, when the hermit was talking about the attacks of the Devil, I felt as if I were back in the fourth century, where demonic warfare was understood to be real—not a mental battle between virtue and vice, but a true battle in which blows are exchanged. . . . Was the hermit speaking of himself? I believe that he certainly was. He was not speaking like a military historian, but like a soldier. . . . Is he crazy? No. The man sitting before me was definitely sane. Is he lying? No, for the man before me was one in whom there is no guile. ⁵⁹

It is important to remember that the hermit, though alone, is still very much part of the monastic and ecclesial community. Monasteries, like houses, have individual and communal space. The cell is the individual center of a Coptic monastery, while the church (or churches) provides the communal center—and, always located close to the church, is the ancient keep (qasr), or tower, the monastery's self-contained fortress in times of invasion. The church and the keep offer a striking juxtaposition. Both provide sanctuary: the church, a communal sanctuary of spiritual calm, prayer, and worship; the keep, sanctuary for the community in time of danger. The keep is a powerful reminder of the precariousness of monasticism—and Christianity—in Egypt.

Before you enter a church (or mosque) in Egypt, you first take off your shoes, because you are about to step on holy ground. When you enter a monastic church, you smell the incense as you feel the coolness of the air and as your eyes adjust to the darkened interior. What struck me most about the monastery churches is how *palpable* everything is: icons are to be touched because they embody the holy (the worshiper touches the icon, then kisses his or her fingers), as do reliquaries (each church

 $^{59}\mathrm{I}$ wish to thank Maged Mikhail for these reflections.

prominently contains rel sanctuary where the price church, a newly discovered in the church where, statement of the church team from France, while the Ascension above the 1991, discovered beneat wall painting of the Anataken down and placed in where it is protected by paper dropped in by the God.

Coptic spirituality is also intensely symbolic as in the secular sense of a sustaining and founda monastery, our guide low sanctuary door and of the head, suspended from the sanctuary screen, known tenth century. It consists are two doors, really); "enificently inlaid with ive tom illustrate the seven contains numerous crosswastika which, he said, encircled by a crescent symbolic and suspended in the second seco

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⁶⁰Deir el-Sourian, "The Kame" (visitor's booklet) 7.

61Deir el-Sourian, 8. A ph plate XIV.

62A poster available in t

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prominently contains relics) and even the door screening off the sanctuary where the priests celebrate the Holy Eucharist. In one church, a newly discovered ancient wall painting has been placed in the church where, shielded by glass, the faithful can still "touch" it. In the Church of the Virgin at the Syrian monastery, a team from France, while cleaning and restoring the painting of the Ascension above the entrance to Saint Bishoi's hermitage in 1991, discovered beneath it a brilliantly colored ninth-century wall painting of the Annunciation. This painting was somehow taken down and placed in a corner of the church near the apse, where it is protected by a wood grille; inside you can see slips of paper dropped in by the faithful with petitions for the Mother of God.

Coptic spirituality is not abstract; just as it is physical, it is also intensely symbolic and mythological (I am using "myth" not in the secular sense of a falsehood, but rather in the sense of a sustaining and foundational religious story). At the Syrian monastery, our guide lovingly explained the rich symbolism of the sanctuary door and of the ostrich eggs that hang just above your head, suspended from the ceiling in long bronze holders. The sanctuary screen, known as the "Door of Symbols," dates to the tenth century. It consists of six leaves, three on each side (there are two doors, really); "each leaf has seven panels of ebony magnificently inlaid with ivory." 60 The seven leaves from top to bottom illustrate the seven epochs of the Christian era. The door also contains numerous crosses and other symbols, including the swastika which, he said, expresses the spread of heresies. A cross encircled by a crescent symbolizes the appearance of Islam.61

"Symbol" is not an adequate term for these stories; they are beliefs; they are actualities. Perhaps "lived symbol" can approach their reality. For example, the monks believe that their monasteries are in the shape of an ark, representing Noah's ark; they are, then, both metaphorically and eschatalogically, riding out the storms of a drowning world to salvation.⁶² Each monastery is

⁶⁰Deir el-Sourian, "The Monastery of the Holy Virgin and St. John Kame" (visitor's booklet) 7.

⁶¹Deir el-Sourian, 8. A photograph of the doors may be see in Burmester, plate XIV.

⁶²A poster available in the monastery gift shops shows the ark of the

steeped in myth, with stories of its eponymous founder or founders; Saint Ephraem's tree, mentioned earlier, offers a good example, 63 and there are many others: when Christ one time passed by the cell of Saint Bishoi, the saint washed his master's feet. Another time, Saint Bishoi carried an old man whom the monks found alongside the road and whom the other monks passed by; the old man was Christ. 64 The Mother of God visited Saint John Kame. 65 The Western visitor, university-trained and saturated with secular culture, has an instinctive desire, even if he or she is a Christian, to separate "fact" and "myth" (in its pejorative sense), but Otto Meinardus, probably the Westerner best informed about Coptic monasticism, offers this salutary reminder:

Historical writings describe events which others remember and project upon paper. Therefore, it is always difficult to distinguish later between projected memory and projected imagination, realizing that imagination is one of the creative aspects of our mind. I do not claim to be the judge to determine where actual history ends and imagination commences. This every reader will have to do for him or herself. 66

Tradition and history blend together in the story of the keep at the Syrian monastery (unfortunately, it was closed for restoration during our visit). According to tradition, the keep was built in the

Church riding out the tempest. The animals of Noah's ark have been replaced by photographs of all the Coptic bishops.

63On the story, see Evelyn White, 114-15.

64 "The Monastery of Saint Bishoy" (visitors' booklet) 6: "We are told that Saint Bishoy carried Our Lord, Who met him as an old man on his way, and that it is for this reason that his body remains uncorrupted to this day. He is also said to have washed the feet of the Lord, Who visited him as a poor stranger."

⁶⁵These stories are often depicted on icons, and were told to us by the monks. Meinardus relates them on pp. 105 and 121. What strikes a Western historian is the mixture of history, tradition, legend, and myth: both our monastic guides and the monastery guidebooks were really quite accurate (according to Western historical standards) on the dates and historical circumstances of figures like Bishoi and Macarius.

⁶⁶Meinardus, xi. Lucien Regnault, *La vie quotidienne*, 35, sensibly reminds us that "a legendary tradition" has made the founders of Baramus "the sons of the emperor Valentinian, Maximus and Domitian, but it is better to respect the mystery in the apophthegmata that surrounds the luminous figures of these two young anchorites predestined to die prematurely after having passed only three years in the desert."

fifth century by Emperor Hilaria, lived as a monk Scholars regard the story fits the current understatence. 68 Early monasticism (solitary) or semi-anchoritidestructions of the early came more cloistered or cebut by necessity. Keeps ap and thick and high defendance haps history, legend, myth partmentalized catagories

The keep at each monas oldest monuments in the All the keeps have undergo we visited Baramus, we go restoration in progress; the big wooden nails in it just of the monastery of Saint Jo

67Fr. Matta, 58, says that t

68See Chitty, 147; Regnault lyn White, 224-27, who notes, 'is a pious legend and no mor Scetis by Zeno cannot be simil

69C. C. Walters, *Monastic* Phillips 1974) 11-12, 86.

70Regnault, 38, concludes hits in our day a monastery of call—gravely or with a smile—four monasteries." A poet may the historian. As Kathleen No Walk (New York: Riverhead 19 giographical stories) for our of the saint existed but why it not need not get hung up on determined bellished by hagiographers but in the early church, and also sobering reminder of spiritual phy (a point vierge, as Thomas

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fifth century by Emperor Zeno (450-91), whose daughter, Saint Hilaria, lived as a monk at Scetis under the name Hilarion.⁶⁷ Scholars regard the story of Hilaria as apocryphal, but the story fits the current understanding of when keeps came into existence.⁶⁸ Early monasticism in the Wadi Natrun was anchoritic (solitary) or semi-anchoritic (an abba and his disciples). After the destructions of the early fifth century, the monks gradually became more cloistered or cenobitic, not out of any monastic theory, but by necessity. Keeps apparently appeared in the fifth century, and thick and high defensive walls in the ninth century.⁶⁹ Perhaps history, legend, myth, and tradition are not the easily compartmentalized catagories we in the West think they are.⁷⁰

The keep at each monastery in the Wadi Natrun is "one of the oldest monuments in the monastery, and the most imposing." ⁷¹ All the keeps have undergone extensive recent restoration. When we visited Baramus, we got a guided tour of the keep and saw the restoration in progress; the ancient wooden door to the keep had big wooden nails in it just like the ancient ones we were finding at the monastery of Saint John the Little. The keep is a self-con-

 $^{67}\mathrm{Fr.}$ Matta, 58, says that the keep at Saint Macarius was built by Zeno in 482.

⁶⁸See Chitty, 147; Regnault, 38 ("un tissu d'invraisemblances"); and Evelyn White, 224-27, who notes, "It is clear that the story of Hilaria *as a whole* is a pious legend and no more. . . . But the benefactions bestowed upon Scetis by Zeno cannot be similarly dismissed."

69C. C. Walters, *Monastic Archaeology in Egypt* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips 1974) 11-12, 86.

70Regnault, 38, concludes his discussion of Hilaria thus: "When one visits in our day a monastery of the Wadi Natrun, the guide never fails to recall—gravely or with a smile—the origins of the keeps that exist still in the four monasteries." A poet may have greater insight into these stories than the historian. As Kathleen Norris has recently commented in *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead 1996) 195, "To appreciate the relevance of [hagiographical stories] for our own time, we need to ask not whether or not the saint existed but why it might have been necessary to invent her; we need not get hung up on determining to what extent her story has been embellished by hagiographers but rather ask why the stories were so popular in the early church, and also what we have lost in dismissing them." For a sobering reminder of spirituality at the interstices of history and hagiography (a point vierge, as Thomas Merton says), see Norris, 186-205.

71Fr. Matta, 58. For archeological descriptions of the keeps at the monasteries of the Wadi Natrun, see Walters, 87-90, written before the recent restorations.

tained monastery, contracted to a defensible space. At the Syrian monastery the keep is 13x14 meters, and 18 meters high. 72 At Saint Macarius, the keep

has a ground floor and two upper floors, and is separated from the stairs leading to it by the narrow drawbridge which could be raised after the monks had taken refuge in it. The ground floor consists of spacious vaulted rooms which were used for storage. At the northern extremity is a well from which the monks could draw water during a raid. The first storey consists of two parts: the eastern section forms the Chapel of the Holy Virgin Mary, which has three altars; . . . in the western portion there are rooms used in late periods for pressing wine and olive oil. [The keep at Saint Bishoi also has a bakery; undoubtedly, they all did.] A trapdoor in the floor of this southern room led to an oubliette for manuscripts.

The second storey contains churches dedicated to Saint Michael, guardian of keeps, Saint Paul the Hermit, and Saint Antony (with a fine, but faded, icon of these saints), and a church dedicated to "the Pilgrims or Wanderers (al-Suwah) who were staunch defenders of the faith in times of tribulation and persecution." The roof of the keep served as a watchtower, "where a sharp-eyed monk . . . watched day and night and, in cases of threatening danger, rang the alarm. In the early centuries, this was a huge slab of hard wood, beaten with a hammer to resound throughout the desert, for originally the function of the alarm was to call the solitaries living in distant places, or to warn them against danger." ⁷³

At Saint Macarius, a wooden drawbridge, about 30 feet high, connects the keep with an entry tower; in times of danger, as when the monasteries were threatened by marauding tribes of Berbers from the desert, the bridge could be quickly withdrawn behind the monks as they fled into the keep. What is impressive about the monks who built these keeps and fortress-like monasteries is that they did not forget their obligations to others; in protecting themselves, they did not lose sight of monastic—gospel—hospitality. Each monastery has a "matama," or "feeding place," a hole from which the gate-keeper could look when someone below

⁷²Deir el-Sourian, 6. The keep at Saint Bishoi is "22 meters in length, 22 meters in breadth, and 15 meters in height"; "The Monastery of Saint Bishoy" (visitor's booklet) 18.

⁷³Fr. Matta, 59-60.

at the entrance to the monas ing the gate, the gatekeeper it, often non-Christian Bedou

The dangers facing the m Father Philemmon at Saint Berbers are in the heart," an on the history of monasticism the early monks confronted b demons of the human heart structive marauders can be. history, and that history is l tated, almost wiped out, in the desert: Abba Moses and sev were murdered. 75 Since the I Coptic Church, have been however, you wonder if the d terior and spiritual: the Copt there are, sadly, still marty doned mosque less than a hu to Bishoi bears eloquent witi tion; acts of violence by Mus long ago, Anwar Sadat, the

⁷⁴We saw the same arrangement Catherine in Sinai.

75See Moses 10 (Ward, 140) at 76A reality not much reported Martyr: Father Ruais Fakher," 109-12. In the Middle East, power of the Martyrian Martin Reprises a Union of the Middle East, power of the Middle East, power of the Martyrian Martin Reprises a Union of the Martyrian Reprises a Union of the Martyrian Reprises a Union of the Martyrian Reprises and Martyrian R

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at the entrance to the monastery had rung a bell. Without opening the gate, the gatekeeper could lower bread to those asking for it, often non-Christian Bedouins.⁷⁴

The dangers facing the monks now have apparently changed. Father Philemmon at Saint Macarius told us that "today the Berbers are in the heart," an insight that deepens as one reflects on the history of monasticism in Lower Egypt: Saint Antony and the early monks confronted both the demons of the desert and the demons of the human heart. And the monks know just how destructive marauders can be. Father Philemmon's metaphor has a history, and that history is bloody: the Wadi Natrun was devastated, almost wiped out, in the fifth century by invaders from the desert; Abba Moses and seven companions chose not to flee and were murdered. 75 Since the Muslim conquest, the monks, like the Coptic Church, have been sporadically persecuted. In Egypt, however, you wonder if the dangers facing the monks are only interior and spiritual: the Copts are still a persecuted minority, and there are, sadly, still martyrs in the Coptic Church;⁷⁶ an abandoned mosque less than a hundred yards from the front entrance to Bishoi bears eloquent witness to modern attempts at intimidation; acts of violence by Muslim extremists are on the rise;⁷⁷ not long ago, Anwar Sadat, the late president of Egypt, subjected

 $^{74}\mbox{We}$ saw the same arrangement at the Greek Orthodox monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai.

75See Moses 10 (Ward, 140) and Evelyn White, 156-57.

76A reality not much reported in the West. See Rodolph Yanney, "A New Martyr: Father Ruais Fakher," Coptic Church Review 14.4 (Winter 1993) 109-12. In the Middle East, persecution is an equal-opportunity thug. Archimandrite Boniface, a Uniate monk, reports, "I remember that during my stay at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai, the Israeli occupants caused much trouble and constantly harassed the monks. One day the local commander threatened the ekonomos of the Monastery, saying they would 'liquidate' them all. The ekonomos answered, 'Wait a moment, and first come with me; I'll show you something.' Reluctantly, the commander followed him, and he showed him the charnelhouse, especially pointing out a group of skeletons, saying, "These here are the monks killed by the Bedouins (he gave the date, but I forgot) . . . we are not afraid of undergoing the same lot at the hands of you guys.'" See Archimandrite Boniface (Luykx), Eastern Monasticism and the Future of the Church (Redwood Valley, CA.: Holy Transfiguration Monastery; Stamford, CT: Basileos 1993) 119, n. 48.

77Among many examples, see recently John Daniszewski, "Mideast En-

Pope Shenouda to house arrest at the monastery of Saint Bishoi, and had the monastery surrounded by tanks and soldiers;⁷⁸ recently, Muslim fundamentalists attempted to assassinate Bishop Samuel, one of the most respected bishops in the Coptic Church. The images should startle us: assassins shooting at bishops, tanks beseiging monks. In a country where the religion of each citizen is stamped on his or her identification card, and where Copts make up less than 20% of the population⁷⁹ and are systematically excluded from many professions, we in the West need to remember that if these monastery keeps are now symbolic, it is a heavy-hearted symbolism.⁸⁰

The purpose of the monastic life, whether the monks are oppressed or living in peace, is to live a life of prayer in union with God; that goal, and the way of life needed to accomplish it, has not changed in 1600 years. The booklet that the Syrian Monastery provides for visitors summarizes very simply the requirements of the monastic way of life with a list entitled "How

mities Outlast Muslims' Month to Purify," Los Angeles Times, February 22, 1996, A9. After our group's departure in March of 1996, a number of Greek tourists (mistaken for Israelis) were murdered outside a posh suburban Cairo hotel.

⁷⁸See Rodolph Yanney, "Preface," Coptic Church Review 17:1 & 2 (Spring & Summer 1996) 4: "On September 2, 1981, President Sadat of Egypt deposed Pope Shenouda III and exiled him to the desert monastery of St. Bishoi, replacing him with a five-bishop committee. He put eight Coptic bishops, 24 priests and more than 100 laymen and women in prison. He also ordered the closure of two Coptic newspapers and three welfare societies." Sadat was assassinated on October 6, 1981 (ironically, another victim that day on the parade grounds was Bishop Samuel, an eminent Copt), but the troops remained around Bishoi for some time, and the pope's house arrest lasted until January, 1985. See also Kenneth Cragg, The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox 1991) 191 and 201 n. 36.

⁷⁹John Watson, "Abba Kyrillos," 5, estimates that there are 8 million Copts out of a population in excess of 55 million. Other estimates range from 3-5 million; see Watson, 5, n.1, who points out that there has not been a census of the number of Copts in Egypt. In the late 1970s, Robert Brenton Betts suggested that Copts numbered "between 3 and 3 1/2 millions, or roughly 10% of the total population." See Betts, *Christians in the Arab East: A Political Study* (London: SPCK 1979) 50, 58-66; the quotation is on. p. 61.

⁸⁰As John Watson, an Anglican clergyman, has observed ("Abba Kyrillos," 31), "The Copts identify themselves as a suffering community. They may not have experienced state-controlled and state-directed persecution

Monks Live": every monk monks usually eat alone hermitage" in cells in the has his daily work; the prayer: at dawn, followed Poemên of Scetis summar

A brother asked Abba Poên to him, "Living in your cel once a day,⁸³ silence, medicell means to experience co to neglect the hours of prahave time without manual quiet. The perfection of the free from bad." ⁸⁵

III. A MONASTIC JOUR

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Monks Live": every monk occupies a private cell with two rooms; monks usually eat alone in their cells⁸¹; monks "enjoy periods of hermitage" in cells in the orchard or out in the desert; each monk has his daily work; the monks meet together twice a day for prayer: at dawn, followed by the Mass, and at sunset.⁸² As Abba Poemên of Scetis summarized it 1600 years ago:

A brother asked Abba Poêmen, "How should I live in the cell?" He said to him, "Living in your cell clearly means manual work, eating only once a day,⁸³ silence, meditation; but really making progress in the cell means to experience contempt for yourself wherever you go,⁸⁴ not to neglect the hours of prayer and to pray secretly. If you happen to have time without manual work, take up prayer and do it without disquiet. The perfection of these things is to live in good company and be free from bad." ⁸⁵

III. A MONASTIC JOURNEY

My journey to the Wadi Natrun was the momentary culmination of a longer, increasingly monastic, journey. Most journeys, even if carefully mapped out beforehand, rarely turn out exactly as planned. In my experience, this is especially true of spiritual journeys—in fact, our spiritual journeys never proceed exactly as we think they are going to. I managed to get a Ph.D. in patristics

like the Russian or Ethiopian churches but they have borne centuries of deadly, daily discrimination." See Hany N. Takla, "Martyrs and Martyrdom in the Coptic Church," *Bulletin of Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society* 1 (1983-84) 1-229.

81According to Fr. Matta, 63, the monks at Macarius, "trying to draw water" from the "early springs" of Church tradition, are changing this tradition; they have built a new refectory "which gathers the monks together daily according to the model of the Last Supper on Holy Thursday."

82Deir el-Sourian, 20.

⁸³For a spirited modern defense of fasting, see Adalbert de Vogüé, *To Love Fasting: The Monastic Experience* (Petersham, MA, Saint Bede's 1989).

84This understanding will strike many moderns as unduly harsh (as it did some of the students in my early monasticism class), but Thomas Merton says that the goal of the monastic life is to lose the false, ego-driven, self; I understand "contempt" here to mean contempt for this false self that makes itself a god at the expense of God and neighbor. But Merton, speaking from his experience as novice master, goes on to point out that the problem for modern monks is that they first must have a self to lose!

85Poemen 168; Ward, 190, slightly altered.

and graduate from seminary without having any interest in monasticism. Truth be told, I realized in seminary that I had come to study for holy orders without really knowing much about spirituality or having much sense of my own spiritual direction (I was fortunate that others could discern something of a direction!). In what turned out to be a gift from God, the best course I had in seminary was one for which my school would not give credit: an informal class in the practice of the classic forms of Christian meditation, taught by a husband and wife team of fellow seminarians. We met weekly, seminarians and spouses, in the basement of the school's guest hall: we prayed, meditated, and began learning to enter that silence where God meets us most fully.

That "course" must have planted seeds of contemplation, but when I graduated from seminary in 1988 the seeds were still patiently waiting in the earth. As seminary drew to a close, neither my wife nor I had been able to find a full-time university teaching position (I was not looking for parish ministry), so I applied for, and received, a two-year post-doctorate fellowship at Yale Divinity School. The terms of the fellowship required each fellow to have a research project, so I dutifully concocted one; it promptly fell through when I discovered that a scholar was already working on it. I impatiently looked for a topic and in the meantime began reading E. A. Wallis Budge's Coptic Texts in order to keep up the Coptic I had learned in graduate school. One day I came across the story of Abba Pambo, a Coptic monk who journeys across the desert in search of both himself and God. That story was a revelation. In typical academic fashion, I first saw Abba Pambo and early monasticism as a research topic, but soon I realized that these ancient monastic stories were speaking to heart and soul, and I began searching them out and hungrily devouring them. 86 As the seeds from seminary began to take root and bring forth new growth, other seeds, long in the ground, also burst forth. Before I went to seminary, my parish priest had taught a course on New Seeds of Contemplation by Thomas Merton; now I eagerly sought out and read everything I could by Merton (and still do). And I realized that monastic spirituality spoke more deeply and truthfully to me than anything else, secular or sacred. My translation of Abba Pambo turned out to be my first monastic

86For some of these monastic stories, see Vivian, Journeying into God.

publication, and I dedicated Merton. Willy-nilly, at least secular priest, married, wit spirit.⁸⁷

So, eight years later (w. great excitement that I an time: not only was I going t not only was I going to par ancient monastic site, bu monastery and for six weel life! But our journeys rarely fact stay "at" the monastery treat compound outside the locked out of the monastery pound—it was often only w the car horn that we could tertain thoughts of regularl In addition, the only monast office at 6 a.m., which for me the site each day, was too early in the morning, it wa out of the compound

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publication, and I dedicated my first book of monastic studies to Merton. Willy-nilly, at least on my part, God was making me—a secular priest, married, with a one-year old child—a monastic-in-spirit.⁸⁷

So, eight years later (with three children now), it was with great excitement that I anticipated going to Egypt for the first time: not only was I going to study and teach early monasticism, not only was I going to participate in an archeological dig of an ancient monastic site, but I was going to live at a Coptic monastery and for six weeks participate in the monastic way of life! But our journeys rarely turn out as we plan. Our group did in fact stay "at" the monastery of Saint Bishoi, but we were in a retreat compound outside the monastery proper. Not only were we locked out of the monastery, but we were also locked in our compound—it was often only with great difficulty and the honking of the car horn that we could get out to go to the dig, much less entertain thoughts of regularly going to the monastery for worship. In addition, the only monastic service open to us was the morning office at 6 a.m., which for most of us, after the rigors of working at the site each day, was too early. Even if we had ventured forth early in the morning, it was not clear that we could have gotten out of the compound

So my dreams of living the monastic life, however briefly, were dashed. However, what happened with our group of faculty and students surprised me and, I think, all of us: our way of life became increasingly, recognizably, monastic. This came as a shock to me because, except for one Orthodox Copt and four Episcopalians, the students and faculty in our dorm were all from Protestant, mostly conservative and evangelical, backgrounds. I discovered very early on in the course I was teaching on "Early Egyptian Monasticism" that the students, most of them undergraduates from small Christian colleges, did not have much knowledge or awareness of monasticism; in fact, there was open and honest hostility to the monastic way of life: Aren't monks, by going off to the desert, denying God's gifts of family and society? Isn't asceticism a denial of God's good creation? Isn't monastic spirituality selfish?

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⁸⁷For an excellent recent appreciation of monastic spirituality by a married, Presbyterian, layperson, see Norris, *The Cloister Walk*.

But two things happened. First, since the students were all Christians, and since I was not teaching at my state university, I decided to abandon a strictly academic approach and instead emphasized monastic spirituality and its continuing value. After our second meeting on The Lives of the Desert Fathers, several students told me that they very much appreciated the connection I was making between early monastic spirituality and the modern world. For our third meeting on The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, I told the students that instead of meeting in our classroom we would gather together in the dormitory chapel. I asked them to read as many of the sayings as they could, but to read them prayerfully, seeking wisdom, not knowledge. Instead of having lecture and discussion, we sat in a circle in front of the apse, with a large modern icon of Christ offering benediction; we took turns reading our favorite sayings aloud, with periods of silence and discussion following. We had taken the apophthegmata out of the lecture hall and scholarly journals and returned them, quite literally, to their original setting: the word in the desert. We were saying that these words were more than objects of study; they still could make a difference in the way we live.

This much was intentional. What happened next was not. Because of the wear and tear from our work on the dig, because of the normal stresses and strains that come when a group of people live together, and because of the abusive behavior of one leader, tensions and conflicts were straining, even overwhelming, our community. The students called a meeting to discuss the problems, and we decided to hold nightly prayer meetings to help keep us focused. When I first arrived, the students, who had come several weeks earlier, were already having weekly Bible study on Sunday with one of the faculty; a number of us decided it would be good also to have a weekly Eucharist, which we had on Saturday nights in the chapel. Now we were also praying together daily as a group. One student then suggested that at dinner, instead of having our usual conversations and chit chat, we have silence and reading from a spiritual book. Appropriately, we began with a book by Matthew the Poor, the abbot of Saint Macarius.88 This

⁸⁸Matthew the Poor, *Community of Love* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary 1984). "Matthew the Poor" translates Matta el-Meskeen, whom we have met above.

nascent monastic impulse after evening prayer we of This was not a big hit! Fro many of the students let of ever, a student did sugges those of us who wanted that—a dormitory full of desert, with some of them

So our little group, study. Coptic monastery, and dig settlement, was taking of with manual labor, study, called the monks to praye were, however reluctantly site or working in the lab pottery or lab work or study spiritual reading, was arountil bed time, there was quiet. The week was and charist.

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Before I had ever been int edge of monasticism was li depiction of the medieval Hood, and to the Kellogg co monk catching nasty looks disturbing the monastic s things that I learned abou abuna and friend Nofer sp our last night at Deir Anb how difficult the life of the all the monks of Egypt, th continue their sometimes Sayings and believed that other human being. But all more painful, I thank God such an emotional and mea To have studied this litera of the extant monasteries of irst, since the students were all teaching at my state university, I ademic approach and instead emnd its continuing value. After our f the Desert Fathers, several stuuch appreciated the connection I astic spirituality and the modern n The Sayings of the Desert Fastead of meeting in our classroom e dormitory chapel. I asked them as they could, but to read them ot knowledge. Instead of having a circle in front of the apse, with fering benediction; we took turns oud, with periods of silence and sen the apophthegmata out of the als and returned them, quite literword in the desert. We were saye than objects of study; they still ay we live.

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nascent monastic impulse then emboldened me to suggest that after evening prayer we observe the Great Silence until morning. This was not a big hit! From 9 to 11 each night was the time when many of the students let off steam by getting loud and silly. However, a student did suggest that things be toned down at night for those of us who wanted to be in silence, and we all agreed on that—a dormitory full of college students out in the Egyptian desert, with some of them observing the Great Silence!

So our little group, studying monasticism, living just outside a Coptic monastery, and digging in the ruins of an ancient monastic settlement, was taking on the shape of a monastic community, with manual labor, study, and prayer: the bells at the monastery called the monks to prayer at a quarter to 6; at 6:30 most of us were, however reluctantly, waking up; from 7-1 we were at the site or working in the lab; after lunch at 2, people had time for pottery or lab work or study; class was often at 6; dinner, with its spiritual reading, was around 8; then evening prayer; afterwards, until bed time, there was time (at least theoretically!) for study or quiet. The week was anchored with weekly Bible study and Eucharist.

For the students, their views of monasticism had changed; for some of them, monasticism had changed their lives. (One student has since joined the Orthodox Church.) As one student wrote in her reflection paper on early monasticism:

Before I had ever been introduced to Coptic Christianity, my knowledge of monasticism was limited to what I had learned from Disney's depiction of the medieval Friar Tuck in the animated movie Robin Hood, and to the Kellogg company's "Rice Krispies" commercial of the monk catching nasty looks from his brothers because his cereal was disturbing the monastic silence. . . . One of the most meaningful things that I learned about monks is that they are human. . . . Our abuna and friend Nofer spoke with us sincerely and almost tearfully our last night at Deir Anba Bishoi. He shared very honestly with us how difficult the life of the monk is, and asked us to pray for him and all the monks of Egypt, that they would not lose hope or strength to continue their sometimes lonely fight. I could have simply read the Sayings and believed that monks struggle with the same sins as any other human being. But although listening to Abuna Nofer was much more painful, I thank God for our friendship with him, and for just such an emotional and meaningful lesson from a present day father . . . To have studied this literature, to have learned about the namesakes of the extant monasteries of Egypt, then to visit those monasteries, to

have contact with the spiritual sons of the first desert fathers, to have conducted an archeological excavation at the monastery founded by one of the fathers we read about, to walk into its excavated church, and sit down in the cell of some long dead monk, are experiences that no language created by God can be suffered to even begin to describe. To remember such an opportunity, what now seems like such an ethereal experience, is itself a treasure, a gift from a gracious God. ⁸⁹

My trip to Egypt had begun with excitement (teaching, the dig, sightseeing) and trepidation (the fear of diarrhea and assassins). Then disappointment (not participating actively in the regimen of the monastery). The excitement (and trepidation) continued, but the disappointment turned into sustained thanksgiving, wonder, and admiration: for the first time in my eight-year monastic journey, I was connecting what I had learned from books with what I could study in the field and hold in my hands; for only the second time in my academic career, I was teaching the subject I care about the most, and I saw monastic spirituality connect with my young students; visiting the Coptic monasteries of the Wadi Natrun showed me the many strengths and beauties of ongoing monastic tradition; I marvelled at the monastic renaissance taking place in Egypt, and I could only admire these monks and lay Christians who devote themselves to Christ in the face of persistent adversity. I can close the description of my journey to the Wadi Natrun with no better words than these from Psalm 107, appointed for the Last Sunday in Epiphany; words we read in our desert dormitory chapel at Saturday-night Eucharist. These words still speak of God's living—and surprising—presence in the desert, which means every desert:

He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry live, and they establish a town to live in; they sow fields, and plant vineyards, and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their cattle decrease. 90

⁸⁹I wish to thank Reagan Wicks for these observations from her paper "Reflections on Monasticism."

⁹⁰Psalm 107:35-38, NRSV.

GLUTTONY: THOUGH

Dennis Okholm

WHY GLUTTONY?

When a person mentions the reactions can be surpris a bit threatened and engage self-conscious about the twe in their refectory. A graduat was an unusual topic of resemployee asked for a copy obut one that makes me susp

Why would a person want curious why it was consider college that proscribes the but does not forbid overeating one turns to Scripture, there of gluttony, unless one relies sis of medieval hermeneutic

The word gluttony is sca Paul implores us to exercise fact, the biblical writers ence more, than they warn us ag the Christian Scriptures (a as Judaism, Islam, and Hintant either. One is not to mone to be overly concerned a

Dennis Okholm (Ph.D., Princet fessor of Theology at Wheaton (part of a larger research projec possible through the support of other redaction of this paper haplorations in Christian Psychological bot (Eerdmans).

¹On the word gluttony see D 1:12. Typical Pauline exhortation Thes 4:4.

²Cf. Mt 4:4; 6:25; Phil 3:19 w 1 Tm 4:2-4.